

## Young minds, young wonders

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Article

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*"London of course has its significance to Malaysia's independence. It was right here that Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun VT. Sambanthan and Tun H.S. Lee started their fight and struggles for the nation's independence.*

*"Fifty years later, today in the same place, we gather to give meaning to that independence. We are here to examine ourselves whether as a nation we have managed to fulfil the true meaning of independence. "*

THESE were the words of a future leader as she introduced an impressive initiative recently. Qurratul Ain Zainul, the project director, was one of the many able, young and passionate organisers who gave their fullest to a project called "Projek Amanat Negara IV", or PAN IV.

The word "amanat" and "negara" could not have been more appropriately chosen to indicate that the project is all about involving more than a hundred of the brightest Malaysian students in the UK and Eire.

And for those who were fortunate enough to witness this rare occasion, the outcome was awesome. Not so much because of its form (we have seen better pomp and pageantry) but certainly so in terms of substance and the manner it was articulated and debated.

No doubt the organisers had the backing of the Malaysian High Commission and the Malaysian Students' Department in the UK, but the credit for the level of intellectual maturity and curiosity, as well as the genuine concern shown, must be entirely theirs.

PAN IV provided a three-day forum for intellectual discourse between prominent speakers and Malaysian student leaders in the UK.



Students and invited guest taking part in the intellectual discourse during 'Projek Amanat Negara IV' in London recently. - Picture courtesy of UK and Eire COuncil for Malaysian Students (Ukec)

It seems to drive home the point that our young and bright minds, when left on their own, can do wonders. They were firm on what is the best for their future as nation-builders and as a new generation of Malaysians.

Coming just a few days after the successful "The Young Malaysians' Roundtable Discussion on National Unity and Development in Malaysia", dwelling on the challenges for nation-building, PAN IV was no less significant.

What's more, it was given a frank assessment by the Raja Muda of Perak in his keynote address during the roundtable. He hinted at a sort of ambivalence we are all too familiar with: "We like to say that our youth are the future of this country, but then proceed to ignore or marginalise them. We want our future generations to be able to think and act wisely, but then we do not give them sufficient opportunities to do so."

He acknowledged that there is no "quick fix" solution in nation-building and that "managing change on a national level is never easy, and certainly not on the scale and speed that we are witnessing".

He closed on a somewhat optimistic, though cautionary note, saying: "I hope we will do our best to guard against cynicism and hopelessness. And I hope we will all stay the course. Failure, may I remind you all, is a costly option."

Still, we are reminded yet again of the existence of "chauvinistic groups in this country, just as there are in others" who, despite their bigotry, will not render "nation-building a futile exercise".

That is, provided we can find better approaches to enlighten those hopeless viewpoints, which are sometimes cleverly disguised to confuse rather than to build.

It is at this point that PAN IV seems to have done tremendously well in steering clear of such clouded and perverted tendencies and, instead, offers new hope. In fact, it turned out to be a convincing testimony of what the future stood for to the new generation of Malaysians. And it is very promising indeed.

Just prior to PAN IV, I was privileged to participate in the 4th European Universities Association (EUA) Convention at Lisbon University, together with some 700 leaders of higher educational institutions from all over Europe.

Over two days, the deliberations were focused on meeting Europe's unified goals on higher education.

Five major points crystallised from the wealth of opinions expressed during the convention — internationalisation, research, quality, funding and change.

They overlap considerably with the on-going discussions back home, except perhaps in the European case it is contextualised within the sub-theme: "diversity with a common purpose".

Here is where it makes all the difference. While we rightly take pride in our rich Malaysian heritage and diversity, our "purpose" seems to be equally diverse. We have ' not emphasised nearly enough the notion of "a common purpose" — which is now the subject of a number of controversies.

In other respects, the debates are also similar. Issues that dominated were those like micro-management, over-regulation, autonomy of universities, and the concern that systems of quality assurance could constrain rather than encourage innovation and creativity.

More interestingly, the EUA Convention did strike a chord with what Raja Nazrin had implied in his keynote address. This was when the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth spoke of his "European dream" for higher education.

While there is yet to be a common "Asian dream" for higher education, the prince was spot on in saying that national unity is best fostered at schools, institutions of higher learning and sports centres.

Logically, these are places where the young minds can be free to dream of a common purpose uninhibited by the excess baggage of the jaded past.

Again, Qurratul Ain said it all: "We sincerely believe that youth is characterised by the clarity of mind, physical strength, vivid passions, idealism and enthusiasm. Therefore, it is the ripe time to nurture responsible, holistic and charismatic future leaders and citizens of Malaysia", referring to PAN IV.

Need we say more—except perhaps to be assured that the future of Malaysia is indeed bright for as long as we continue to engage constructively with our young minds. And not impede them with our dampening attitudes and selfish biases.

To Wan Mohd Firdaus Wan Mohd Fuaad, the convenor of PAN IV, and all those who made it happen, we salute your exemplary effort in fulfilling the true meaning of independence.

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